The Humanistic Relativistic View Of God’s Righteousness

Humanism is the philosophy which teaches that humans, their rights, their freedoms, their needs, their happiness, self-fulfilment and self-esteem should be the central focus of everything. Relativism is the philosophy that there is no absolute truths nor absolute rights and wrongs about anything. Multitudes of modern churchgoers have tried to mix these two pagan philosophies with Biblical teaching.

One example of such an adulterous blending of humanism, relativism and Biblical ideas occurs in relation to those who say God’s righteousness:

- does not relate to God-determined absolute rights and wrongs.
- does not refer to His absolute justice.
- is purely relational – it refers solely to how God personally relates rightly to humans, angels and His creation.
- is solely or primarily His faithfulness to His covenants, people, creation and promises about salvation.

God’s righteousness does refer to how He personally rightly relates to people, angels and creation. But it is far more than that. In fact, unless we have a clear revelation of His absolute righteousness in nature and character, regardless of His relationships to others, we will have a paganised false view of how He relates to others.

His righteousness does relate partly to His faithfulness. But His righteousness also refers to His absolute justice and to absolute rights and wrongs determined by Him. It is a very human-centred or humanistic view of God’s righteousness to say the latter is only or primarily an expression of His faithfulness to His covenants, covenant promises, people and creation.

Prior to God creating humans, He was perfectly righteous in all aspects of His nature and acts. During that eternal period prior to His creation of humans, He did infinitely more than just planning some covenants. So most of God’s righteous acts prior to the creation of humans were unrelated to His covenants. Therefore, God’s faithfulness to His covenants, promises, people and creation is only one aspect of His broader righteous character and actions.

God’s faithfulness is only one form of His righteousness. His righteousness is not a form of His faithfulness. God would be perfectly righteous even if He had never made a covenant with anyone and if humans and creation never existed.

The humanistic relativistic view of God’s righteousness suits the humanistic and relativistic age we live in at present. Most unbelievers and many churchgoers do not like to think God has absolute standards of right and wrong by which He judges with perfect justice. Instead they like to think His righteous standards and morals can be changed to suit the sinful standards of human society. They prefer the idea of a God Who is only faithful, loving, gracious and merciful.
The “feel-good” view almost ignores His promises to punish

The “feel-good” humanistic Biblically unbalanced view of God’s faithfulness concentrates so much on His faithfulness in fulfilling His gracious promises about salvation and redemption, that it almost totally ignores His faithfulness in fulfilling His promises to punish eternally those who do not have saving faith in Him.

Nehemiah 9:8 shows that one aspect of God being righteous is He was faithful to perform His gracious covenant promises or Words to Abraham. But note Nehemiah 9:33-34 and Daniel 9:11-14 reveal that God’s righteousness is also expressed when He is faithful to fulfill His promises to punish unrepentant sinners. In Romans 3:3-5, Paul links God’s faithfulness to the fulfilment of His promises about inflicting His righteous anger or wrath on unrepentant sinners.

Because the above false humanistic view either downplays or totally rejects the idea that God’s righteousness includes His justice, it fails to teach that God’s faithfulness to fulfill His promises to punish unrepentant sinners is one manifestation of His justice. His Mosaic and New Covenant promises to punish unrepentant sinners are expressions of His justice. He gives these sinners what they justly deserve or have merited. ¹

How the humanistic view tries to justify itself

To try to justify its own ideas, the humanistic relativistic view argues that the belief God’s righteousness refers partly to the absolute rightness of His nature, character and commands and to His justice, is based on pagan Greek religion and Roman law.

For example, one of the pagan Greek goddesses was called “Dike” meaning “Justice”. ² The pagan Greeks believed that Dike was a daughter of Zeus – the Father of the Greek gods. As Colin Brown says, pagan Greeks taught “Dike” was a cosmic force which was immanent and inherent in the natural sphere and was related to humans living together in society. ³ “Dike” was the goddess of deserved punishments. Acts 28:4 records that pagans in Malta believed the goddess Justice was punishing Paul for his sins when a poisonous snake bit him.

But just because the ancient Greeks had a goddess of justice does not mean the idea of absolute justice and absolute rights and wrongs is pagan in origin. If we applied the same foolish reasoning to other characteristics of God, we would make some other equally ridiculous conclusions. For example, other Greek divinities were Athena – the goddess of wisdom, Aphrodite – the goddess of love and Apollo – the god of light, healing and truth. On the basis of similar poor reasoning, we could argue that love, wisdom, light, healing and truth were unbiblical pagan Greek religious concepts.

Similarly, just because the ancient pagan Greeks and Romans made animal sacrifices to their gods, cannot be used as proof for the idea that Jesus’ death as our substitute on the Cross is a form of pagan religion.

¹ Refer to Chapter “Punishments from God” in Volume for details about how God’s punishments are justly merited or deserved and are not just undeserved consequences.
² Vine, page 338.
³ Colin Brown, page 353.
Also note no ancient pagan Greek had a totally Biblical view of divine justice. For example, they believed that the Greek gods “often did evil things like humans”. For example, Zeus, the Father of the Greek gods was an adulterer and a paedophile. The Greek god Apollo and the demi-god hero Hercules or Heracles were paedophiles also. When referring to ancient pagan Greek attitudes, Colin Brown states: “Hence the righteous man (dikaios) was originally one whose behaviour fitted into the framework of society and who fulfilled his rightful obligations towards the gods and his fellow men (Homer, Od. 13,209)”. But note this is different from the Biblical view of righteousness which relates to the character and nature of one God as revealed in His written Word. Many Greeks who fitted into the framework of their wicked pagan society were not righteous in God’s eyes.

In addition, the ancient Greek Stoic philosophers taught there were God-given absolute laws of nature. But their “god” was not a Person who was separate from creation but instead was Hindu-like nature-god.

The fact that the ancient Greeks invented a goddess of justice relates to the fact all humans have a God-given conscience (see Romans 2:14-15). Their consciences have God’s standards of justice and absolute rights and wrongs written on them. In their own sinful imaginations, these ancient Greeks corrupted the truths about God’s justice, right and wrong which was found on their conscience, to relate to a non-existent goddess and a Hindu-like Stoic nature-god.

Also just because some early Church writers like Tertullian introduced some false concepts of Roman law into Christian teachings, does not prove a pagan origin for the idea God’s righteousness includes His absolute justice.

**His righteousness is not limited to His relationship-restoring love**

It is true that one aspect of God’s righteousness is His love expressing itself in restoring the relationships between Himself and fallen humans. But the modern humanistic, relativistic view overemphasises this relation-restoring love aspect of His righteousness and tries to minimise or exclude the justice aspects of His righteousness. This false view follows the error of the German liberal theologian, Albrecht Ritschl.

Ritschl taught that the righteousness of God is “simply the consistency with which His love provides for the good of men”. Ritschl’s view subordinates God’s justice to His love to such an extent that the former becomes only an expression of God’s love, mercy, grace and kindness. The truth is God’s love is one aspect of His righteous or right nature.

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5 Colin Brown, page 353.
6 Bromiley, Volume 4, page 110.
7 Refer to the section “Tertullian” in Chapter “The meriting type of legalism” for more details of some of Tertullian’s false teachings.
8 James Hastings (Editor),”Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Volume 10, T. and T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1974, page 792.
9 Ritschl also did not believe God’s justice included punishment or deserved repayment for sins (Hastings, page 792). In addition, he rejected the Biblical government-legal view of God justifying believers (Elwell, page 955). Ritschl denied the Biblical views of original sin, the incarnation of Christ, revelation and resurrection (Ibid). He also taught Christ was not God and miracles do not occur and Jesus’ death was not a substitutionary atonement (Emms, pages 550
The very shaky foundations of the new view on God’s righteousness

At the back of E. P. Sanders’ book “Paul and Palestinian Judaism”, there is an appendix by Manfred T. Brauch called “Perspectives on ‘God’s righteousness’ in recent German discussion”. In this Appendix, Brauch comments on the debate on justification and righteousness since the 1960’s between various authors such as Kasemann, Bultmann, Stuhlmacher, Conzelmann and so on. But more importantly, Brauch made the following comments about God’s righteousness or in Greek “dikaiosune theou” or in Hebrew “tsedaqah”.

“A new turning point for the discussion was provided by H. Cremer in that he pointed to the Old Testament as the historical presupposition for Paul’s conception of ‘God’s righteousness’: Cremer demonstrated that ‘dikaiosune theou’ must be understood in terms of ‘tsedaqah’, a ‘relationship concept’ which designates the actions of partners in keeping with the covenant (i.e. covenant-faithfulness).” 10

In other words, Brauch argues that a crucial change occurred in the understanding of many Bible teachers when H. Cremer’s definition of the Old Testament Hebrew word “tsedaqah” or “sedeqah” meaning “righteousness” was used as a basis for interpreting Paul’s understanding of the righteousness of God.

Since the 1960’s, many Bible teachers have for various reasons accepted Cremer’s very limited definition of the Hebrew word for “righteousness” and have assumed Paul’s concepts of “the righteousness of God” are based on Cremer’s definition.

But as has been shown by me in earlier sections of my present chapter, the Old Testament Hebrew words for “righteousness” mean far more than God’s faithfulness. Read also what the below Hebrew experts say these Hebrew words for “righteousness” mean.

Harris, Archer and Waltke say the root of the Hebrew words “sadeq”, “sedeq”, “sedeqah” and “saddiq” basically means “conformity to an ethical or moral standard” and “The earliest usages of ‘sedeq’ or ‘sedaqah’ (except Genesis 15:6, 18:19, 30:33…) occur in relation to the functions of judges…” 11 They also say that these Hebrew words are also used: “as a descriptive characteristic of God (Deut. 32:4), as just and righteous, the standard being his own will and nature as the supreme being. ‘Sedaqah’ or ‘sedeq’ when applied to God mean righteousness, his characteristics then becoming the ultimate standard of human conduct”. 12

Harris, Archer and Waltke also refer to the covenantal aspect of God’s righteousness when they say, “God is righteous, under the covenant, when he delivers his people from trouble (Psalm 31:1), their enemies (Psalm 5:8), the wicked (Psalm 37:6 and when he is vindicating Israel before her foes or executing vengeance on them (Jeremiah 11:20)”.

Note the Hebrew word “sedeq” meaning “righteousness” is used in some contexts “in connexion with weights and measures, indicating conformity to the proper standards (Leviticus 19:36, Deuteronomy 25:15, Ezekiel 45:10)”. 14 Here we see it is nonsense to teach that it is a pagan idea to say righteousness is conformity to proper standards.

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11 Harris, Archer and Waltke, page 752.
12 Ibid, page 754.
13 Ibid.
14 Colin Brown, page 356.
Vine says: “Sedeq and sedaqah are legal terms signifying justice in conformity with the legal corpus (the Law; Deuteronomy 16:20), the judicial process (Jer. 22:3), the justice of the king as judge (1 Kings 10:9; Psalm 119:121; Proverbs 8:15), and also the source of justice, God Himself: ‘Judge me, O Lord my God, according to thy righteousness; and let them not rejoice over me…And my tongue shall speak of thy righteousness and of thy praise all the day long’ (Psalm 35:24,28). The word ‘righteousness’ also embodies all that God expects of His people”.¹⁵

When commenting on the meaning of the Hebrew word “sadaq”, Vine says: “It is a legal term which involves the whole process of justice”.¹⁶

Bible Study Questions

1. Explain what is wrong with the false modern humanistic relativistic view of God’s righteousness.
2. Is God’s righteousness solely His relationship-restoring love? What verses prove your answer?

¹⁵ Vine, page 206.
¹⁶ Ibid, page 205.